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ABSTRACT

The competency testing movement will yield few improvements in the schools and will create arbitrary barriers to progress for some students. Although it may stimulate educational improvement for limited-English-proficient (LEP) students, as for other students, by giving cohesion to the curriculum, guiding scarce resources for remediation, motivating teachers, students, and parents to higher standards of performance, and increasing accountability, it also presents major problems for LEP students. Increased course requirements, greater reliance on tests in English, and higher expectations of skills demonstrated only through English may lead to greater alientation from school, more dropouts, and inadequate development in either academic or vocational skills in this population. The achievement gap between minority and nonminority students may widen rather than narrow. Minority language students should be assured of genuine opportunities to build skills for future success. (MSE)

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Competency Testing for Limited-English-Proficient Students

Norman C. Gold

For centuries we have employed various techniques to determine whether our students have learned what we have taught, but the widespread movement to assess school competencies (variously referred to as minimum competencies, proficiencies in basic skills, or merely basic skills) has been with us only since the mid-1970s (Glass 1978).

I believe that the competency testing movement is ill-advised, and that it will, by itself, yield few improvements in our schools. It will ultimately be found to have engendered arbitrary barriers to progress in school for some students, while focusing our attention on a selected few (mainly trivial) skills. The movement is grounded in the scientific method, yet lacks the necessary scientific rigor to ensure that the results of competency tests will be valid and reliable (Glass 1978).

In spite of these shortcomings and the attention drawn to a new list of mid-1980s school reforms, the competency testing movement has gained considerable momentum, and so will be with us for some time. It may, in some schools, stimulate better instruction for limited-English-proficient (LEP) students, but while some good might come from competency testing, it currently poses a series of problems and challenges.

We do know that various states have reported a greater failure rate on competency tests for minority language and racial/ethnic minority students than for nonminority students, but little information exists regarding the impact of competency testing programs specifically on LEP students.[1]

Legislation in Florida, New Jersey, California, and other states established either statewide assessment programs or mandates for local school districts to develop their own competency assessment standards. Often these assessment programs were coupled with sanctions for students failing to pass specific tests (retention at selected grades or denial of a high school diploma). Some programs, such as Rhode Island's (RIDE 1984), avoided the sanctions and instead recommended to schools the teaching of selected proficiencies at lower grades and then recommended course content for those courses required for high school graduation.

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The competency testing movement generally assumes that English is the only language of teaching and assessment. These English-only assessment programs have sought to set goals and benchmarks for performance in the three main skills areas—reading, writing, and mathematics.

The present discussion is limited to programs assessing these general school competencies.[2] Other assessments of LEP students (e.g., English language proficiency, academic achievement) present similar instructional and psychometric challenges but are beyond the scope of this paper.

Competency Testing and Better Instruction

The competency testing movement may stimulate the improvement of education for LEP students in four ways. These are similar to the improvements anticipated for all students and include the following possibilities. Competency testing can:

- Increase the cohesion and organization of the curriculum and the clarity with which grade-level objectives are stated;
- Guide the use of scarce resources for remediation to those students most at risk of not mastering basic skills;
- Motivate teachers, students, and their parents to strive for higher standards of performance;
- Hold schools and teachers more accountable for the results of their efforts.

Problems with Competency Testing

There are many who argue that a good competency testing program can accomplish these improvements in schooling for all students. Nevertheless, competency testing programs present several major challenges specific to our work with LEP students.

Language of the test. Competency testing conducted only in English confounds language proficiency with the skills to be tested.

Grade retention. When the results of English-only competency testing serve to bar students from passing to the next grade, the students are subjected to unreasonable barriers to progress in school—exactly those barriers which were prohibited by the Supreme Court in *Lau* v. *Nichols* in 1974.

Diploma sanction. A diploma sanction imposed on an older LEP student may be an unreasonable barrier due to the limited notice available to the student and to the limited opportunities that may be available for acquiring English proficiency and the academic skills covered in the competency test.

Marketing. Inadequate marketing of the competency testing program to minority language students and their parents through community media and in their own language may result in inadequate notice of the standards and any sanctions, lack of support for the school program, and lack of understanding of the procedures for remediation.

Psychometric rigor. Flaws in test construction, scoring, and interpretation may be so severe as to make accurate predictions of mastery of the school's objectives virtually impossible. In addition to the language of the test, relative item difficulty, cultural bias, and other factors may serve to disadvantage minority language students.

Remediation versus continued language development. Instruction intended for remediation of academic skills may be inappropriate for LEP students who merely need to continue a normal course of second language development. Many of the elements of such instruction may be similar but will fail to support the student's development if teachers incorrectly assume that they are remediating academic deficits.

Language of instruction and remediation. The language of both initial instruction and any remediation based on competency tests should be the language indicated by a careful diagnosis of relative language proficiency and by an assessment of related school and community factors. The non-English speaker diagnosed in Spanish as having a need for remediation in mathematics applications should receive the math remediation instruction in Spanish, if at all possible.

Options for Educators

Each of these challenges has at least one response that may improve the impact of a competency testing program on LEP students.

Language of the test. Assessment of LEP students in English may give results highly correlated with the mastery of English but not at all correlated with the mastery of the reading or math skills tested. Competency tests given at grades 3, 6, and 8 might be developed in several language versions in addition to English. Such an approach is permissible in California, and California school districts are encouraged to use en route assessments in English or the primary language to diagnose student needs and to gauge the students' acquisition of important school-related skills. Final mastery of skills for the high school diploma must be demonstrated in English, however.

Grade retention. Grade retention should be avoided whenever possible, especially for LEP students who have mastered grade-level skills even though they may not yet be able to demonstrate these in English.

Diploma sanction. In those states or school districts that impose a diploma sanction for failure to pass the high school competency tests, extra precautions should be taken to communicate the existence of these

sanctions to LEP students and their parents in advance and to advise them of the realistic possibilities of completing a diploma within the normal four-year term. Students need not leave high school at age 18 in most states, and many students may be encouraged to stay one to two additional years to acquire sufficient English and academic skills to pass the competency tests. In addition, LEP students may be encouraged to enroll in adult education programs, community colleges, or work-study programs in preparation for a GED (Certificate of General Educational Development—equivalent to a high school diploma for many purposes). In some states the GED may be taken in Spanish or other languages.

Marketing. The primary language may be used to provide information to parents and community members about the competency plan in newsletters or bulletins. The state of California has printed brief explanations of the competency requirements in several languages and has disseminated these to parent and community groups. As information regarding student progress is compiled, these groups should be informed about the rate of progress of minority language students and other groups in meeting the grade-level competency goals.

Psychometric rigor. Local- or state-mandated competency tests should be carefully evaluated to ensure that:

- The desired competencies (skills, proficiencies, instructional objectives) are clearly defined;
- Items are correctly devised to provide both an economical and sufficiently thorough sample from the field of all possible items that might be used to assess the objectives;
- There is a sufficient theoretical and practical underpinning for any assessment approaches chosen;
- Normal precautions are taken to ensure test reliability and validity (CSDE 1982).

Remediation versus continued language development. Limited-English-proficient students may need extensive oral language development, enhancement of general school readiness, orientation as to how schools operate in the United States, motivation for learning, instruction in logic, and so forth, rather than remediation of specific reading skills. Teachers must learn how to discern the difference between these skill areas.

Language of instruction and remediation. With LEP students care should be taken to teach the required competencies at each grade without duplicating efforts in both languages. Which of the competencies must be taught in English (e.g., the ability to write standard English) and which may be developed in the primary language or ESL classes as the

student is acquiring English (e.g., the ability to improve one's own writing by restructuring, correcting errors, and rewriting) should be determined. A large number of the competencies that appear in state and local competency plans may be developed in any language.[3]

Summary

State and federal equity guarantees require that minority language students be provided programs that ensure the acquisition of the competencies required of all students. Minority language students may not be able to acquire these competencies if assessments en route to high school graduation are not valid and reliable. Testing bias or inadequate remediation to overcome the effects of prior discrimination may lead to higher rates of attrition of minority language students.

Increased course requirements, a greater reliance on tests in English, and higher expectations of skills demonstrated only through English may lead to a greater alienation from school, an increased number of dropouts among minority language students, and a lack of development of either academic or career skills among this special population. The achievement gap between minority and nonminority students may widen rather than narrow in an age in which we are increasingly dependent on literacy and on computational and analytical skills for all aspects of life.

Students, parents, and schools will all need to share the responsibility for holding all parties accountable for both the mastery of specific academic competencies as well as the mastery of the English language. But care must be taken to ensure that minority language students are provided with genuine opportunities to build the skills they will need for future success.

Notes

1. For a more extensive treatment of the relationship between competency testing and LEP students see Gold (1984).
2. There is a continuing debate about whether competency tests should cover both school skills (the mastery of which predict success in further schooling) and life skills (the mastery of which predict success as an adult in out-of-school settings) (Glass 1978). Schools have mainly chosen the former.
3. See Hudelson (1981) and Thonis (1983) for a discussion of the relationship among reading skills in various languages.

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